

# LANGUAGE CONTACT AND INTERFERENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

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When two languages are brought into contact as a result of geographical proximity (as English and Afrikaans are) the accompanying social contact leads to the appearance of interference phenomena, or deviation from the norms, in the language of bilinguals. They occur most often, and most obviously, in the lexis.

'Whereas the unilingual depends, in replenishing his vocabulary, on indigenous lexical material and whatever loanwords may happen to be transmitted to him, the bilingual has the other language as a constantly available source of lexical innocation.' (Weinreich, p. 5a). The factors prompting such borrowings (p. 59-60) include:

- (a) familiarity with a different culture and its novel concepts (*verlig*, *apartheid*, *boerehaat*);
- (b) insufficiently differentiated semantic fields (the SAE speaker has no handy lexical item for distinguishing between *slappap* and *stywepap*: *thin* or *runny porridge* is available, but *thick* or *stiff porridge* is not satisfactory, *thick* too imprecise, while *stiff* is never used of cooked food.
- (c) Social values: At present Afrikaans does not have the social prestige to prompt borrowing in the way that, for example, French does. Nor, on the other hand, is it held in the low esteem which results in a host of borrowed pejorative words; and borrowings for comic effect are rather phonological than lexical.
- (d) Finally, a bilingual's speech may suffer interference from another vocabulary 'through mere oversight' (Weinreich, p. 60), especially when he is more concerned with the topic of the message than its form.

These interference phenomena can under certain conditions spread to unilingual speakers, or in other words, become part no longer of the *usage* of individuals, but of the *language* of a whole community (Weinreich, p. 1).

The two phases of interference in speech and in language should be distinguished. In speech, it occurs anew in the utterances of the bilingual speaker as a result of his personal knowledge of the other tongue. In language we find interference phenomena which, having frequently occurred in the speech of bilinguals, have become habitualized and established. Their use is no longer dependent on bilingualism. When a speaker of language X uses a form of foreign origin not as an on the spot borrowing from language Y, but because he has heard it used by others in X-utterances, then this borrowed element can be considered, from the descriptive viewpoint, to have become a part of language X.' (Weinreich, p. 11). For example, when a bilingual SAE speaker uses the Afrikaans word *kook* instead of *boil*, it is purely a nonce-borrowing. When, however, he uses *braai*, this is another matter. *Braai* is an established element in SAE and is an entirely separate lexical item from *barbecue* in our language. For the individual speaker it is an inherited loanword, and although he may share my indecisions about their spelling, he would automatically use *braai* with English plural and possessive markers and, as a verb, with English tense, number and participial markers. He would not, however, use *kook* in this way without being very conscious of the process of tacking English grammar onto an Afrikaans word.

Now, although we SAE speakers are well aware of the existence of language interference and borrowing, we tend to think of it as taking place exclusively in the domains of phonology and lexis. We are all conscious at times of our accents, whether we enjoy them or cringe at them, and we all take a friendly or hostile interest in the loanwords which 'enrich' or 'pollute' our language. But language interference is also to be found on other levels less susceptible, where it is consequently less common and less obvious.

## A. LEXICAL-SEMANTIC INTERFERENCE

In addition to words lifted direct from one language to another, retaining their meaning, like *braai* or *bakkie*, there are words which undergo a slight shift in meaning when they are transferred, often

towards the derogatory, e.g. *boer*. Or, more commonly, only part of the meaning, or only one of several connotations is transposed, e.g. *tannie*, which is used in SAE to describe an elderly dowdy woman, while in Afrikaans it also has the denotative meaning of *aunt*. *Platteland* is another example here, which I shall discuss below. Then, there are the words which are introduced because there is no word in the receiving language for the concepts they express, e.g. *boerewors*, *voortrekker*. Other loanwords replace items in the receiving language, which then acquire a new or restricted meaning, or occasionally disappear. *Vlei* has changed *marsh* into something romantically mysterious and foreign. *Life in the country*, or *in the provinces* is usually, for the SAE speaker, *life in the platteland*. *In the country* is confined to its more arcadian connotations, while *in the provinces* is seldom heard. *Provincial*, however, seems to have survived, perhaps because *platteland* becomes rather cumbersome with an adjectival ending. Another interesting example is *agterskot*, which the experts at the SABC say has entirely replaced arrears in the context of payments made to farmers, and it is accordingly to be heard in agricultural news items.

For some speech communities, *there by* (with only a soupçon of demonstrative connotation) has replaced *near* or *at* in a sentence like 'We had our crash there by the turn-off to Durban' when the listener is presumed to know the place referred to (Afrikaans 'daar by die draai...').

Finally, there is semantic suppression. The perfect tense is showing signs of demise, which I would call the blurring of a semantic category rather than the decay of a grammatical rule. But this is as likely to be a divergent change – the systemic internal change which takes place spontaneously in a language – as a convergent change, resulting from language interference in a bilingual community. Or it might be an influence from America, perhaps hastened by the influence of Afrikaans. That is a matter for the experts.

The well-known absence of the modals *should*, *would*, *might* and *could* is a good example of semantic suppression, which I shall refer to again later. So is the fact that *ought to*, *have to*, and *should* are suffering the same fate, to be replaced with the ubiquitous imperative of *must* (Afrikaans *moet*).

The other areas of language in which transfer phenomena appear are of course grammar and style.

## B. GRAMMAR

The grammar of a language is a much less open system than its lexis, and consequently much less susceptible to influence which, when it does appear, is in the blurring of distinctions or the relaxing of rules. The gradual disappearance of the change in tense and word-order in reported question ('She asked me did I want it') is an example of this, though it is possibly another example of divergent change, rather than convergent change. As might be expected, Afrikaans has had little direct effect on English grammar. 'I'm coming with' (*Ek kom saam*) is the favourite example.

The imperviousness of grammar to interference is illustrated by J.J. Smith:

In spite of a hundred and fifty years of close association, in spite of the higher status of English during so many years of administration, in schools, and in culture; and in spite of the fact that the majority of Afrikaners have been bilingual for a long time, English has certainly not yet succeeded in making Afrikaans lose the inflection of the attributive adjective, reject the prefix *ge* in its past participle, alter the formation of its plural, or simplify its complicated word order.

(There are none-the-less signs that the position of the verb might be influenced by English, at any rate among bilinguals.)

## C. STYLE

Style belongs essentially to the surface structure, and includes the selection of turns of phrase and word-order which give character to writing. In this region choice between optional modes of expression can be influenced by the favoured mode in Afrikaans, resulting in an English style which, while it is correctly English, reflects elements of Afrikaans taste.

Instead of English *think, hold*, we find *to hold the opinion, to be of the opinion* (Afrikaans: *mening hou, van mening dat*).

Instead of Eng. *instead of*, we find *in place of (in plaas van)*.

*There exists considerable disagreement* instead of *there is, ... or considerable disagreement exists (daar bestaan...)*.

'It concerns the *aspect* of labour' instead of 'it concerns *labour*.'

*Aspekte* and *fasette* seem indispensable of Afrikaans expository style, whereas *aspects* and *facets* are uncommon in English.

*Thereof* instead of *of this (daarvan, hiervan)*.

'Labour is *of importance*' instead of *is important (van belang)*.

'Males under the age of 16 years' instead of 'under 16 years of age,' or 'under the age of 16' (*die ouderdom van 16 jaar, onder 16 jaar*)

'Already in 1911 trade unions were...' instead of 'By 1911, trade unions were...' ('Reeds in 1911 is vakbonde...')

'The question must be asked, what is...' English prefers 'What must be asked is...' (*Die vraag moet gestel word...*).

*With respect to/with regard to* or even *in connection with* abbreviated to *i.c.w.*, for *about (in verband met, i.v.m.)*.

*In respect of* instead of *in relation to (ten opsigte van)*.

*To be in a position to* for *to be able to (in staat (gestel) om te)*.

'This course *contains, inter alia*, economics, politics...' for *includes (Dit behels inter alia)*.

'It was, *inter alia*, the cause...' for 'it was *in part the/the partial* cause...'

*The abovementioned/aforementioned/the former/the latter* for a simple anaphoric *this* or *these (die voorgemelde, voorgenoemde, eersgenoemde, laasgenoemde)*.

*However* for *but (egter)*.

All the examples I have quoted are from the written (usually) semi-formal language of exposition. Perhaps it is far-fetched to suggest that these stylistic habits will ever have any real influence on SAE except on the bilingual who is in daily contact with Afrikaans used in this way. Perhaps, among the users of this language the conservative influence of literature from Britain and America will be the true influence. And yet there are many users of such language – businessmen of all kinds, lawyers, doctors, engineers – who possibly have considerably more contact with Afrikaans in their daily lives than they do with any form of literature, and whose reading is more or less confined to the newspapers, the *Financial Mail*, *To the Point* and *Scope*.

Furthermore, SAE is increasingly exposed not only to Afrikaans, which is being used more and more in business and professional life especially, but also to English which has been translated from Afrikaans. Weinreich (p. 87) quotes Schmidt-Rohr's 'domains of language use': the family, the playground, the school (with sub-divisions) the church, the literature, the press, the army, the courts, the administration. In almost every one of these domains, the SAE speaker is exposed to contact with Afrikaans either directly or via translation. Family and playground contain Afrikaans relatives and neighbours. The school is far from being a bastion of conservative English. The extreme shortage of English-speaking teachers means that in all but the best schools at least some subjects, often including English itself, are taught by Afrikaners. While the absence of a common religion is always a great barrier to intimate language contact (Weinreich, p. 92) fundamentalist churches are beginning to hold bilingual services. The courts, the army and the administration in South Africa as a whole are very largely Afrikaans, resulting in direct language contact, or indirect contact via translation. The media too are the product of language contact. Radio news and news commentaries or interviews are invariably translated from Afrikaans, and presumably television will be the same. In almost every 'domain of language', then, English is in direct or indirect contact with Afrikaans.

Then too, there is the matter of language and national character. '...The native language itself has been moulded by the national psychology... and is itself the product of the national character of the generations of speakers who contributed to its present form':

...In the field of syntax a concrete, matter-of-fact and practical turn of mind will lead to uncomplicated and clear expression, such as is found in English and French, though here a distinction must be made between an essentially artistic concreteness as in French and an unartistic practicality as in English. The tormented and involved psychology of the German mind, on the other hand, is reflected in German sentence structure with its long and involved sentences, and their intricate system of sub-clauses and numerous qualifications.

In semantics the national character will express itself most obviously in certain phrases and idiomatic expressions and by

synonyms and subtle distinctions typical of the national psyche. English expresses itself with characteristic diffidence in turns of speech like 'Would you mind doing this?' or 'I am afraid you are wrong', 'It would seem that', etc. This is typical of a nation whose social life is a delicate tissue of accommodations and compromises, and whose 'mind has a native affinity for unanalysed adjustments and reactions'.

French reflects the more realistic approach to life characteristic of the southern peoples, whereas English and also German reflect a much more subjective attitude to reality by a wealth of synonyms, each of which reflects a certain subjective approach, reaction, or overtone. (Prins, p. 698, 699-70)

There is no need to accept Prins's extravagant claims and unfounded generalizations to feel that language and character must be connected in some way, so intimate is the bond between word and personality in all our experience. We English-speaking South Africans are generation by generation losing our 'Britishness' (How many of us still describe ourselves simply as 'English?'), becoming instead more and more 'South African' and so presumably closer and closer to 'Afrikaansness'. Our language must then change with our changing national character – as it has perhaps begun to do, with the decline of those modals and subjunctives which typify the 'characteristic diffidence' of the 'English'. If this is the case, it seems likely that our language will change along the lines I have suggested above.

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